



The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague

Timothy Garton Ash

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The Magic Lantern is one of those rare books that define a historic moment, written by a brilliant witness who was also a participant in epochal events. Whether covering Poland's first free parliamentary elections -- in which Solidarity found itself in the position of trying to limit the scope of its victory -- or sitting in at the meetings of an unlikely coalition of bohemian intellectuals and Catholic clerics orchestrating the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Garton Ash writes with enormous sympathy and power.

In this book -- now with a new Afterword by the author -- Garton Ash creates a stunningly evocative portrait of the revolutions that swept Communism from Eastern Europe in 1989 and whose after-effects will resonate for years to come.

The Magic Lantern: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague Details

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Author : Timothy Garton Ash

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Lorenzo Berardi says

Despite of my high expectations, this one turned out to be the less interesting book by Timothy Garton Ash I read so far.

Clever title and well researched accounts all right, but dry journalism/essayism with very little captivating insight on Poland and Hungary. Garton Ash does know much about the rise of Solidarnosc and yet he didn't manage to engage me about that in 'The Magic Lantern'.

On a side note, I've found it odd and cheeky that the author emphasizes the role he himself had in the '89 process either addressing miners in Poland or coining a slogan for the Velvet Revolution in Prague. Is that true? Is that necessary to know? Is that the kind of political involvement a historian might look for? And did TGA speak such flawless Polish, Czech, German and Hungarian to become an opinion leader? I would be surprised if he did.

The chapters about East Germany and the former Czechoslovakia are the shortest ones here, but I liked them more than the rest of the book. Garton Ash and Vaclav Havel were drinking buddies and it shows.

Adam says

It's amazing to me that we weren't taught in history classes in high school about the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War—a period we lived through as children. I have a vague memory of a T.V. being wheeled into our classroom to watch the news of the fall of the Berlin wall when I was eight.

It's not until reading The Magic Lantern that I've ever learned anything about the subject, really. As a "witness account," this read is very emotional. At times the sentences come short and fast, betraying the excitement and energy of "being there." One of the reasons I chose this book was because it was so slim—I wanted to get an introduction; not hundreds of pages of historical minutiae or detailed analysis. But Ash's writing is so warm and his reporting so earnest, I finished the book wishing it were longer.

Ash invents the awkward but apt word "refolution" to describe Eastern Europe's overthrow of Soviet rule because there was both movement from below and "change 'from above,' led by an enlightened minority in the still ruling communist parties" (14).

The quick succession of change in the region is inspiring by its varied deployment of nonviolence, labor unionism, electoral process, inventive mass communication, and perhaps, most surprisingly, the arts (the book's title is from the name of the Prague theater that served as the headquarters for the dissident movement and which launched absurdist playwright Vaclav Havel to power).

Another surprising insight was the importance of television as a medium for “refolution;” ironically calling to mind the oft-quoted Scott-Heron poem/song. The use of television by the resistance was an important way of cutting through the layers of Soviet discourse and psychology that had settled over the years. Also fascinating was the widespread samizdat networks, reproducing and distributing censored works. With all of the recent discussion of social media use in the recent Arab Spring, it was awe-inspiring to think of this comparatively laborious and primitive form of revolutionary communication used just a few decades ago.

Understandably, Ash is quite generous to the dissidents and defensive of their choices. It begs a critical response, and a response with the benefit of the passage of time. I now feel suspense for learning about what has happened since '89. Which dreams were fulfilled and which ones shattered? What balances have been struck between markets and states? What are the prospects for the future of the region?

David says

Having watched all this happen on TV back in the day, it was interesting to get more perspective from someone more on the ground. I do think the Prague chapter got bogged down in details and felt pretty clunky, but it was a good read on the whole. I'd like to see another edition, presuming there isn't one already, for what happened in the next years after the update at the back. Kind of changes things.

Brendan Blom says

A good eye-witness record of the fall of Communism in eastern Europe in 1989. Not too much analysis - one step up from journalism - so is a good companion piece to something like Tony Judt's "Postwar." Interesting to read in-the-moment descriptions of individuals like Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, and how they are able to guide world history-changing events through their own words and behaviour.

Dawod says

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Mohammad Ali says

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Oregon Expat says

Riveting read on the development of democratic movements in central and eastern Europe (Poland, Hungary, Germany, and Czech Republic) at the end of the Cold War.

Manuel Menezes de Sequeira says

Great book. To the author's insight one must add the fact that he witnessed the events firsthand and that he writes wonderfully. The result is a book that must be read, if possible followed by *The File: a Personal History* (I read them in the wrong order). Knowing the past helps you understand better the present, it is said. That's exactly how I feel, having just finished the book. The importance of people such as Václav Havel and even Václav Klaus, the current president of the Czech Republic, is made very clear. Especially in the case of Václav Klaus, one understands better his reluctance to sign the Lisbon Treaty or to go along the global warming scare. I bought this book in the shop of the The Lobkowicz Collections (<http://www.lobkowicz-collections.org>), which itself is a remarkable case of procedural justice that could only have happened in a country that suffered decades under a communist regime. Not having had that experience, the rest of Europe does not really understand the true, deep meaning of distributive (in)justice.

Geoffrey Rose says

Timothy Garton Ash, one of our greatest chroniclers of contemporary Europe, is at his best in this eyewitness account of the velvet revolutions in Central Europe in 1989. More journalistic than interpretative history but that works here...and it's a riveting, exciting read. His accounts of the personalities involved (Walesa, Havel, Michnik, others) are detailed and interesting for a 167 page book! Highly recommended.

Kim Collmer says

I really enjoyed this book, though as the writer says at the beginning, it is all written so quickly after the fact that it reads almost like a very long magazine article. The writer comes across initially as a bit full of himself and his role in the changes that took place (sorry) but once I got past that, he has very informative insider information that brings you right into "history."

Avi Grundner says

I wish I'd had a little more time to read this, the rushed school aspect of it didn't really help. But it's a solid book, really clear and evocative writing. It's clear that the author is a trained journalist. I found the perspective particularly interesting, as it was written only a year or so after the events described.

Mostafa says

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Colleen says

The Magic Lantern is a journalist's reflections and personal observations of the 1989 revolutions in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Germany as opposed to being a complete historical account. It gives the reader a quick overall reminder of how these revolutions came about with some violence in Poland and almost none in the other countries. It's kind of like a close up behind the scenes view. The Magic Lantern in the title refers to a theater in Prague where decision makers met to form the new government. Journalists would camp out there for the latest news on a committee meeting, announcement of an office, or whatever decision had come about. It's a fairly quick read. Good background. I was motivated to explore some points in history; always a good thing if a book prompts the reader to do that.

Krista says

This is the author's brief reflections on his experience of the 1989 Revolutions in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. The essays are entirely readable, and make several good points: a comparison of the various political entities (noting that Poland was "professional" in its political protest movement, in comparison to Czechoslovakia) and the shocking "ordinary" steps taken by people in protest of Communism. (Indeed, a theme in the book is the actions of regular people, like an elderly person who collared TGA at the Polish elections to make sure he was voting against Communism in his selection of candidates.) Overall, TGA asks (in 1990) whether this is the dawn of "Central Europe," since Eastern Europe as a notion was linked intrinsically to the Soviet system.

Overall, the book is thoughtful and provides important witness insight into the events of 1989. The author's self-insertion does stand out (he takes credit for the 10 months/10 weeks/10 days comment, famous during the Revolution), but that's a small issue in an otherwise valuable book.

Usain says

In de traditie van 'Reds' van John Reed doet Timothy Garton Ash verslag van de val van de Oost-Europese communistische regimes in '89. Hij staat tussen het volk en, vooral, tussen die mensen die intussen overbekend zijn en de revoluties mee tot stand hebben gebracht, Lech Wa??sa, Václav Havel, Dub?ek en Bärbel Bohley van Neues Forum. In Praag is hij voortdurend aanwezig in het Lucerna-gebouw op het

Wenceslasplein, het broednest van de nieuwe Tsjechoslovaakse staat. Hij ontleent de naam van zijn boek eraan, lucerna, lantaarn.

Als gedegen journalist rapporteert Timothy Garton Ash niet alleen, maar tracht, on the fly, duiding te geven bij de zich ontwikkelende gebeurtenissen.

In de editie van 1999 is er een slothoofdstuk toegevoegd met een terugblik 10 jaar later. De conclusies zijn bijgesteld in het licht van de gebeurtenissen die zich intussen hebben afgespeeld: bevrijdingsacties in de hele wereld, in Midden- en Zuid-Amerika, in Zuid-Afrika, de oorlog in de Balkan.

Een bevlogen boek over een stuk recente geschiedenis, nu toch alweer 25 jaar geleden. Toch raar dat daarover zo weinig te vinden is in de boekhandel. De invloeden op de toestanden vandaag zijn nochtans niet te verwaarlozen.
